

St Thomas and St Thomas of the Air Church  
 April 29, 2022  
 Easter II  
 Good Shepherd Sunday  
 rmcneely+

*I am the good shepherd  
 I lay down my life for the sheep.*

From the themes of today's Epistle and Gospel  
 Today is informally known throughout Christendom  
 as "Good Shepherd Sunday"

Shepherds are common and important figures in the Bible:

Abel, the son of Adam and Eve

Abraham

Isaac

Jacob and his 12 sons (the 12 tribes of Israel)

Moses and Prophets like Amos were shepherds

David, who slew Goliath and was King

David's 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm: The Lord is my Shepherd,  
 is known by millions

Rachael, Jacob's wife,

Rebekah, Isaac's wife

And Zipporah, Moses' wife, were all shepherdesses.

It was to Shepherds that the angel Gabriel first announced the birth  
 of Our Savior at Bethlehem.

and it was the Shepherds that were first to arrive to greet the baby  
 Jesus.

So it is against this backdrop  
 that Jesus tells us that  
 He is the Good Shepherd

and Peter tells us

we were as sheep gone astray  
but now are returned unto the Shepherd  
and the guardian of our souls.

What is it?

What are the character traits of shepherds that  
the Bible,  
Our Lord and St Peter  
Bring to our attention today?

In England

more than 170 years ago  
there lived a young preacher/priest  
Frederick W. Robertson  
He became a renowned preacher  
clergyman/son of an army commander.

On Good Shepherd Sunday all those years ago  
He gave a sermon in he church at Oxford  
That dealt with the character of shepherds:

“Beneath the burning skies and the clear starry nights  
Of Palestine

There grows up between the shepherd and his flock  
An union of attachment and tenderness.

It is the country,

where at any moment sheep are liable  
to be swept away by some mountain torrent,  
Or carried off by hill-robbers  
Or torn by wolves.

At any moment their protector may have to save them  
by personal hazard.

Every hour of the shepherd’s life is (at) risk.  
Sometimes for the sake of an armful of grass  
in the parched summer days,

he must climb precipices almost perpendicular  
and stand on a narrow ledge of rock,  
where the wild goat will scarcely venture.

Pitiless showers,  
driving snows,  
long hour of thirst—  
all this a shepherd must endure  
if the flock is to be kept at all.  
And thus there grows up between the shepherd  
and the dumb creatures he protects,  
a kind of friendship  
You love those for whom you risk, and they love you;  
therefor it is  
that,  
not as here where the flock is driven,  
the shepherd goes before and the sheep follow.

They follow in perfect trust,  
even though  
he should be leading them away  
from a green pasture,  
by a rocky road,  
to another pasture they cannot yet see

Hirelings are shepherds but not good shepherds...  
they are tested by danger...

Now a man is a hireling  
when he does his duty for pay.  
He may do it in his way faithfully.  
The paid shepherd  
would not desert the sheep for a shower  
or a cold night.

But the lion and the bear-  
 he is not paid to risk his life against them  
 and the sheep are not his,  
 so he leaves them to their fate...  
 the cause of the sheep is not his cause.”

Some of you may recall the 16 mm film “Morning Star”  
 that we saw a few years ago at Good Shepherd Sunday.  
 It documented the annual 200 mile trek in Arizona  
 to White Mountain  
 Of the shepherd, Rosario Lucero  
 And the hardships and the sacrifices he made  
 to get his flock safely to summer pasture.

The abiding characteristics of shepherds  
 Are courage,  
 independence,  
 self-determination  
 sacrifice.  
 And the love that motivates them.

But the cause of Jesus is the sheep.  
 He is the Good Shepherd.  
 To Him risk does not even matter.  
 There is certainty and no question.  
 He will give His life for the sheep.  
 He gave His life for the sheep,  
 knowingly  
 and voluntarily,  
 and lovingly.

He submitted to the torture of the cross  
 to defeat the evil, and sin,  
 to defeat death,  
 and to give his sheep the chance for everlasting life.

There is perhaps nowhere else in scripture  
where we see better evidence  
of Jesus' great mission to save mankind than right here.  
The disciples would not know for months  
what Jesus was talking about when he told them:  
"I lay down my life for the sheep".  
They could not know the power  
and the depth of His love  
that was behind His statement.

Now, there is irony in this.

Jesus who, at His baptism,  
at the moment of the beginning of his earthly ministry,  
is called out as the lamb of God, by John the Baptist  
is later the Good Shepherd of the lambs  
and finally is Himself the sacrifice.  
Just as the lambs were being sacrificed at Passover  
so Jesus was sacrificed on the Cross.

Many of the sheep born near Bethlehem were bred to be sacrificed  
in the temple at Jerusalem.  
So Jesus was born in Bethlehem and sacrificed at Jerusalem.

The Shepherd sacrifices himself to save the sheep.  
Here Jesus sacrifices Himself to save us from our sins.

Now, as you know, I have never had much to do with sheep in my  
life  
but my good wife has;  
hundreds of thousands of them.  
She grew up on a sheep and cattle station in NZ.

She will tell you that sheep are  
smelly,  
dirty,  
completely helpless  
(when rain soaked fall over, left unattended they will die),  
but most of all she will tell you  
sheep are fundamentally stupid animals.  
Forget everything Hollywood ever told you about sheep they are  
caveman stupid.

But, the point is not to denigrate sheep  
But that sheep are completely reliant upon their shepherds  
for everything,  
even their very lives and existence.

While it is not particularly complimentary of our species;  
the inspired word of God in Holy Scripture  
equates us with sheep in order to complete the metaphor,  
it may be an accurate comparison.

We too are completely reliant upon our Shepherd  
for our lives  
and our immortal souls  
and for the life to come.

And I have to admit that we too can be  
as helpless,  
forgetful and stupid  
and as stubborn as sheep.

Like sheep we are vulnerable:  
Without their shepherd  
sheep are vulnerable to the attack of wolves,  
Like the sheep, without our Shepherd  
we too are vulnerable to the attack of the evil  
that lurks in our lives.

The evil, like the wolves,  
can tear apart our souls and destroy us.  
We need a shepherd for protection.  
And like the wolves, our sins can also tear apart our souls.  
We need a Shepherd to protect us from ourselves and to  
forgive our sins.

Like sheep we are carried off by the robbers of our souls  
and we need a Shepherd to return us to the fold.  
Like sheep, we can be stampeded scattered,  
isolated from each other and lost.

We need a Shepherd to quell the panic,  
to find us when we are lost  
and to bring us home  
to the protection of His church.

Like sheep, we can recognize the storms in our lives  
but sometimes cannot come up with what to do about them.  
We need a shepherd to guide us back to safety.

Like the rain soaked sheep,  
the troubles of our lives can knock us down.  
Without a shepherd, we cannot get up  
and will die a spiritual death.

We have that Shepherd . . . the good Shepherd.

Are we prepared to be devoted members of His flock?  
Are we prepared to hear His voice  
To follow where He leads,  
even over a rocky road to a pasture we have not yet seen?

St Peter closed today's Epistle with this:  
I think I will too:

For ye were as sheep gone astray  
But are now returned unto the Shepherd  
And Bishop of your souls.